



All were wrong, but very sincere

Rarely have so many Big Thinkers (and Medium-Size Commentators) been so spectacularly wrong.

Nobody has got anything right yet about what's really going on in China.

From the commonplace to the cosmic, we've all taken a cream pie in the face.

Two weeks ago, you couldn't find anybody in town, in Congress, in the media, in the think tanks, who wanted to bet against the students. A lot of what was being said reeked of cheap sentiment, but it was all anybody wanted to say and to hear.

This time last week, after the Peoples Liberation Army massacred Chinese young people in Tiananmen Square, we were all settling down to watch, via satellite, a civil war.

Alas, that avenging army, which everyone saw stalking the bloody 27th Army through the side streets of Beijing, turned out to be just as ephemeral as the tide of democracy we all saw on the horizon the week before, ready to curl and break and wash away every felon and miscreant.

Washington, both Official Washington and Media Washington, imagines that "information" is what we have to sell here, but what we're actually peddling during times of these crises is "opinion." Sometimes the opinion is accurately labeled as rhetoric, sometimes mislabeled as fact, and when it turns out to be correct it's usually a coincidence. As usual, Washington exempts itself from the law, this time the Accuracy-in-Labeling Act.

When we're wrong, no one feels the least humbled, or reluctant to peddle defective goods again.

The part of Official Washington that gets paid to know about these things has begun to make fudge. William H. Webster, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, says — now — that the American intelligence services never believed that a civil war was imminent in China. 2214

"We in the intelligence community never subscribed to that theory at this time" Judge Webster

told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, his hometown newspaper, in a remarkably elastic verbal formulation.

"I think there is no real indication that major sections of the army are defecting." Any infighting among soldiers was not of the seriousness that

"would suggest that soldiers under their leaders were prepared to turn on other soldiers." The

phrase "civil war" was used "too early, too soon, without clearly identifying the nature of the apparent skirmishes."

Another administration official had the grace to confess total ignorance: "Everybody's been somewhat embarrassed, really, at how difficult and unsuccessful they've been in getting any information. (This was said anonymously, naturally.)

"It's a magic word — people really think that 'intelligence' people are omniscient, but boy, they sure aren't."

Deprived of the cheap thrill of watching a civil war, we can instead enjoy the open season on George Bush, who was (a) tardy in saying anything about the massacre, (b) slow to impose sanctions, which (c) were too little and too late in any event, and by the conventional media wisdom (d) too kind and too gentle with the Chinese leaders in his Thursday-night press conference.

You might think that all of us who demonstrated so abundantly that we know no more about what's going on in China than a Topeka housewife wouldn't be so quick to take the measure of the Bush response now, and find it wanting.

If you think that, you don't live in Washington.

With "peace" settling at last over Tiananmen Square, we turn from cheap sentiment to cheap posturing. Some people — Rep. Stephen Solarz of New York, that old cold warrior himself, leaps to mind — imagine that it's going to be tough now to have a worthwhile relationship with Beijing, since it's turned out to be so beastly. The magpies of the liberal media are joining this din about not wanting to do business with a mass murderer.

This is an odd turn. When, in living memory, has the United States *not* dealt with mass murderers? As awful as Deng may be — and it's reasonable now to believe the worst — he's no worse than Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev, Fidel Castro and Danny Ortega, and the usual run of bloody African dictators for whom there has been no scarcity of apologists.

There's nothing inherently wrong with cheap sentiment, of course. Men and women use it on each other every night. But indulging it during daylight hours is a dangerous way to run governments.

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times A-4
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
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The Chicago Tribune

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